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**Liberal Education, Winter 2005****Teaching for Tips***By Natasha Sajé***LINKS**

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Some years ago, when I was waiting tables at an upscale restaurant in Washington, DC, I had a customer who, after receiving the whole artichoke he'd ordered, indignantly called me back. He pointed to the mess of chewed leaves on his plate and said, "This artichoke is tough." I had two choices: I could instruct him (in front of his client) how to eat an artichoke, or I could accept the blame. "I'm so sorry," I said. "Let me bring you the fettuccine."

Waiting tables is filled with decisions like this, moments when servers use their knowledge of people to ease or vex their customers' souls. The server must approach each table and ascertain what the patrons want, or more precisely, what they need. And this includes not just what they want to eat and drink, but also how much they know about food and wine, what kind of mood they're in, and what degree of distance they prefer. Then the server has to adjust herself to their needs. The relationship is not unlike that between teachers and students.

Before I took a full-time teaching job, I taught courses as an adjunct for twenty years, often waiting tables as well. Both kinds of work combine the excitement of the unknown with the challenge of keeping track of details. You must be quick on your feet, picking up verbal and nonverbal cues. Who needs a glass of water, *now*? Who wants to speak but is too shy? You must care for people. You must create an environment in which customers can enjoy themselves or students can achieve self-realization. In both contexts, once you've figured out what they need--and if you don't allow your ego to get in the way--a kind of grace takes hold. Whether they comprise a table of six or a classroom of twenty, you love them for being human and you try to make them love being in your hands (the Greek concept of *agape* with a dash of *eros*). And to serve them truly, you have to give them not what you want or what they say they want, but what they need. Sometimes fettuccine, sometimes an artichoke lecture. Occasionally, individuals can be rude, arrogant, or lazy. You must remind yourself: *love them, love them; don't sink to their level.*

The student as customer

If I'm nostalgic for tending tables, for situations where a troublesome customer is out the door in an hour instead of a semester and where the relationship between service and pay is clear, perhaps it's because of the impact of consumerism on higher education. It's gotten to the point where students actually write things like "I'm not paying this kind of money to get a B" on their course evaluations. Teaching may not exact the physical demands of waiting tables--there are no fifteen-pound

stainless steel coffee pots to lug around--but, with teachers evaluating students and students evaluating teachers, it does present dilemmas.

The student-as-customer phenomenon is unknown elsewhere in the world. In Europe, where educational institutions are public and free, students nonetheless feel privileged to enter them. In private U.S. colleges like mine, professors tremble in the wake of teaching evaluations and give higher grades because of them. It's like working for a tip, except the payoff isn't cash under the plate; it's having one's contract renewed. Administrators worry that the "customers" will shop elsewhere if they are not pleased. A recent study by Valen Johnson, a professor of statistics at Duke University, shows that students rate the courses in which they earn higher grades more favorably. At my college, where the average grade is an A-, administrators debate how to curtail the number of students who receive honors at graduation. One solution, of course, would be to abolish course evaluations. Grades would plummet faster than a broken cable car. Students say they want easy As, but is that what they need?

I also teach in a low residency program, which offers a master of fine arts in writing and where the evaluation of students and faculty alike takes the form of one-page essays. While they don't solve the student-as-customer problem, these essays can do justice to complicated situations. Even the effort to articulate such situations entails a kind of learning. Anyone who reads the pair of essays--by student and teacher--can see how personality affected the semester's work. Most colleges don't use written evaluations because they're time-consuming and difficult to standardize. But that's my point: teaching and learning are difficult to standardize.

The bases of every food service operation are numbers and profit: the ratio of food cost to selling price, the number of "stars," the amount of cash taken home each night, even the "86" when there's no more lamb. Profit is the reason restaurants don't feed their employees. At that Washington restaurant, it took me only about two hungry weeks to revise the fastidious notion that I wouldn't eat food off a guest's plate. Once, the owner caught me gobbling marinated figs and solemnly informed me that each fig cost forty cents. Numbers may be the heart of the restaurant business, but they shouldn't be the soul of higher education.

Tough grades send a loving message (*agape* with a touch of *eros*). With an eye to the future, where the consequences of laziness are more serious than grades, they say "work harder." Yet these days, even many administrators don't believe that students *need* tough grades. The student who earns a D probably forgets what I've expressed in conferences and written on his papers. I hope he understands the grade as an expression of concern rather than as a form of punishment. But he probably focuses instead on that one crude letter, that 2.0.

I used to have nightmares about customers sitting down at one of my dirty tables. Now my nightmares involve opening my course evaluations, those one-to-five rankings of teaching, and finding all ones and twos. You see, my college doesn't give tenure--another trend in higher education--so if the college decides I haven't pleased the customers, I'll be tending tables again.

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